



Modi secures historic third term but loses his majority

India's PM must rely on BJP allies to form an administration



Narendra Modi greets the crowd at a campaign roadshow in the northern city of Varanasi (Getty)

MAROOSHA MUZAFFAR

Narendra Modi has won a historic third consecutive term as India's prime minister – but his victory was overshadowed by

the failure of his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to win an expected outright majority, and a surprisingly strong performance by the largely discounted opposition.

“*Abhki baar 400 paar*” – “This time, beyond 400 [seats]” – was the rallying cry during his campaign, articulating the party’s aim of dominating the 543-seat Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament.

It was an ambitious target but not an unreasonable one, after the BJP won two successive landslide victories in the 2014 and 2019 elections; in the latter, the BJP won 303 seats in its own right, contributing to a ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) tally of more than 350 – nearly a two-thirds majority.

Almost all exit polls suggested the BJP was close to achieving its aim. But in the event, Mr Modi’s party fell woefully short and will now be forced to rely on coalition partners to form a government. It could have major implications for how the world’s most populous country is run over the next five years.

With most constituencies counted, the ruling NDA had 295 seats and the opposition INDIA bloc’s tally stood at 230, a massive improvement from its showing in 2019. The NDA will still form the government, having crossed the majority threshold of 272 seats, and Mr Modi will stay on as prime minister. But political analysts said it was a “moral defeat” for the BJP and might just spell an end to the “politics of hate” that have defined Mr Modi’s decade in power.

“This was no ordinary election,” renowned left-wing political and social activist Harsh Mander told *The Independent*. “All Modi was offering was a project of hate. At a time when there is a jobs crisis, unprecedented inequalities, and severe climate challenges, a BJP landslide win would have meant that India slipped into very dark times.”

He said there was “a sense of relief” that the BJP had not won a clear majority. “A coalition government is better, as the BJP will have to rely on coalition partners to formulate any policy. There will be discussion, debate, and no one-man government.” Mr Mander credited the opposition for putting up a spirited fight

despite many challenges. “There was huge money-power. There was the use of all the state institutions against them.”

In advance of the election, federal agencies under Mr Modi’s government raided and jailed leading opposition politicians such as Arvind Kejriwal, chief minister of Delhi and leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, and froze bank accounts held by the main opposition Congress party. At the same time, the BJP was revealed to have been the biggest beneficiary of a system of secret political donations, called Electoral Bonds, that was recently declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

If not for the crackdown, Mr Mander argued, the INDIA bloc might have performed even better.

As results trickled in yesterday, it became clear that the BJP faced setbacks in several states, notably India’s largest, Uttar Pradesh, where the INDIA bloc, led by Akhilesh Yadav’s Samajwadi Party, was ahead in 43 of the 80 seats. In West Bengal, an eastern state where the BJP had campaigned aggressively, the Trinamool Congress was ahead in 32 of the 42 seats.

In Maharashtra, the opposition was on course to secure 30 seats, while the BJP and its allies lagged with 17. More remarkably, the BJP was trailing in at least 30 per cent of the seats it won in 2019, and some of its most prominent faces were staring at defeat.



BJP supporters dance at the party’s offices in New Delhi after hearing of a candidate’s victory yesterday (AP)

Smriti Irani, the minister for women and child development, lost to Kishori Lal of Congress in Amethi, a prestige constituency she was vying to retain after wresting it from Rahul Gandhi, the face of the opposition, in 2019. Prajwal Revanna, a lawmaker from BJP ally Janata Dal Secular who was arrested last week on sexual abuse charges, lost in the southern state of Karnataka.

Several factors contributed to the BJP's struggles in these states and constituencies, Arati Jerath, a political analyst, told *The Independent*. "There was a lot of attrition as far as the BJP was concerned, when you look at the ground reports," she said. "They suggested that the BJP was not going to do well."

And, unlike in previous elections, there was no singular national issue this time round. Key issues varied by state, reflecting caste dynamics, lack of enthusiasm among BJP and RSS workers, and concerns about unemployment.

"Honestly, what I am seeing in this entire election is unlike 2014 and 2019. There is no national vote," she said. "It's very much like what happened in 2004, which the BJP lost. The outcome was an aggregate of state elections. That is, I think, what we are seeing today. There was public anger, which exploded against the BJP."

Supriya Shrinate of the Congress party told NDTV that the opposition's performance in Uttar Pradesh, the heartland state that has been the bedrock of the BJP's Hindu nationalist politics, was "a moral loss" for the ruling party.

Ms Jerath agreed. "If the BJP failed to secure a clear majority when the entire election campaign was centred around Modi, that is a clear moral defeat for the BJP."

Manisha Priyam, a political observer, told *The Independent* that the result showed that "state-level interests and federal interests are very important and integral to the idea of India".

Political scientist Gilles Verniers told *Al Jazeera* that the BJP "went from using Modi as the main argument to using him as the sole argument. And that backfired." "This is a setback," Mr Verniers argued, referring to the BJP. "The options now are to

be more conciliatory and share power, or to double down on authoritarianism, which is the path they have taken over the past few years.”

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India's election leaves Modi with a diminished mandate



Analysts' predictions of a landslide victory for Narendra Modi failed to materialise (AFP/Getty)

ALISHA RAHAMAN SARKAR

Narendra Modi's apparent failure to win an outright majority in India's general election will spark conflict within his party and limit his mandate to carry out sweeping reforms in a historic third consecutive term.

Modi is still set to return as prime minister, but will need the support of coalition members in his National Democratic

Alliance (NDA) bloc to do so, a stunning development that defies most analysts' expectations and every exit poll released after voting closed in the general election on Saturday.

As of yesterday evening, Modi's BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] was leading in 245 seats, well short of the 272 needed for a majority. His NDA coalition as a whole was ahead in 295 constituencies, while the opposition INDIA alliance was leading in a remarkable 232 seats. Some exit polls had predicted that INDIA would win as few as 120.

Modi boasted on the campaign trail that his NDA would win a third landslide and as many as 400 seats in the 543-seat lower house of parliament. His opponents and critics feared what would happen if he were given such a mandate, including the prospect that he could change India's secular constitution and declare it a Hindu country. Modi denied having any plans to do so, but opposition leader Rahul Gandhi declared yesterday evening that voters had "fought to save the Indian constitution".

Whether or not such a change was truly on the cards, Modi had promised that some major reforms would come in his first 100 days after winning the election. "My plan for the first 100 days after the result is ready, and I won't waste a single day," the prime minister repeatedly said during election rallies and scripted TV interviews.

Some of the BJP's most eye-catching plans included a uniform civil code, essentially forcing the country's many communities to bring their customs closer in line with the Hindu majority, and a national register of citizens, which critics said could see many Indian Muslims without proper documentation branded illegal immigrants.

Another campaign pledge was to regularise Indian elections so that federal and state votes all take place at the same time every five years. It was widely thought that this policy would benefit only the BJP, as it would capitalise on Modi's supposedly iron-clad personal approval figures.



A supporter of the Indian National Congress party waves the national flag as others watch election results (AFP/Getty)

Such sweeping changes will now almost certainly be challenged by Modi's alliance partners, said Sayantan Ghosh, columnist and professor at St Xavier's College in Kolkata. "The Modi government will have to backtrack on its ideology," he explained. "Modi is for the first time under pressure. It will be the most compromised NDA government ever formed. Modi and home minister Amit Shah will have to take the responsibility, because they have been at the top and there are resentments within the party."

If, as expected, the BJP doesn't win a majority on its own, it will be "heavily dependent on the goodwill of its allies, which makes them critical players who we can expect will extract their pound of flesh, both in terms of policymaking as well as government formation", said Milan Vaishnav, director of the south Asia programme at think tank the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "This would be truly uncharted territory, both for Indians as well as for the prime minister," he told reporters.

Opposition leaders are attributing Modi's election underperformance to his failure to address the country's growing economic inequality, with unemployment steadily rising even as billionaires and major businesses thrive. Since rising to national prominence with his home state's "Gujarat model" of

economics, until now Modi's pro-market stance has been seen as a major selling point.

Reuters reported that two government officials had said Modi was planning to introduce a raft of business-friendly measures, including pushing through regulations that would make it easier for large companies to hire and fire workers. Those same markets responded very negatively to yesterday's results, with the Sensex and Nifty indices dropping some 8 per cent before recovering slightly.

Dr Chietigj Bajpae, senior research fellow for the south Asia programme at Chatham House, said the election result "may restrain some of the BJP's more controversial identity-driven politics, but it will also make it more difficult to make progress on some of the more politically sensitive reforms, for instance labour reforms and land acquisition. This explains the fall in India's stock market as the results are being announced."

Though no one is currently in a position to challenge Modi's authority within the BJP, yesterday's results are a huge dent in his aura of invincibility, and will embolden factions within the Hindu nationalist movement that believe he has taken too much power into his own hands.

One senior member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the militaristic ideological parent of the BJP, said its leaders were considering ways they could "pull up" or reprimand Modi for the result. They suggested the RSS could seek to hold an internal election, which, though not directly affecting Modi's position as BJP leader, could see the RSS move away from him in the direction of a preferred successor.

While these results might seem like bad news for the BJP, ultimately Modi has won the election with a campaign that started out talking about economic growth and ended in shrill dog-whistle references to Muslims taking wealth from Hindus. Modi began his election campaign by inaugurating a temple to the Hindu god-king Ram that was built on the site of an illegally demolished 16th-century mosque, and the courts are currently

hearing cases against two more mosques in the BJP-run state of Uttar Pradesh.

But if one event yesterday suggested that Modi's tactics for appealing to his right-wing Hindu base were faltering, it was the result from Ayodhya. The very seat where Modi inaugurated the Ram Temple was actually won by a candidate standing for the INDIA alliance.

“One important thing the elections have shown is that India's democracy remains more robust than is often perceived,” Bajpae notes. “Despite its imperfections, a degree of checks and balances persist in India's democracy, with the institutions still stronger than the individual. In a country of India's size and diversity, with longstanding traditions of dialogue and disagreement, democracy cannot be easily overturned.”

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